Examining a Sport and Recreation Management Internship Program at a Historically Black University

Jason Perry, East Stroudsburg University
Brian Smith (Advisor), Drexel University

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Graduates in the field of sport and recreation management must be well versed in relevant content, practices, and behaviors of sport business professionals in order to vie for positions in a very competitive job market. Internship programs in the field of sport and recreation management, which are currently required in most degree programs, aim to provide students this knowledge. Although extensive research has explored experiential learning in higher education (Bethell & Morgan, 2011; Danielson & McElroy, 2013; Kolb, 1984), few studies have examined this phenomenon in the realm of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in great detail. This study illuminates learning experiences of students at these institutions to provide a fuller picture of experiential learning in the field of sport and recreation management.

Previous literature associated with career commitment in the sports business industry reveals that some students turn away from the field altogether and decide to pursue other career options after experiencing a negative internship experience (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent, & Turner, 2005; Odio, Sagas, & Kerwin, 2014). According to Surujlal and Chinomona (2012) the opportunity to work in the field of sport management and gain a positive professional experience can increase work readiness and prepare students for a competitive workforce upon graduation. Due to the growing popularity of jobs in the field of sport and recreation management, program directors must be cognizant of the increase in competition for internship positions and must maintain a systematic approach to placing students. Sport agencies and students have the power to work together in finding good matches that benefit both parties. A review of the literature indicates that students have a higher desire to work in the field when they are not contracted for minuscule job responsibilities for minimal or no compensation during the internship experience (Cunningham et al., 2005; Koo, Diacin, Khojasteh, & Dixon, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of one HBCU sport and recreation management internship program and explore how these practices might contribute to educating this specific population of learner for professional work. The focus of this study was to explore the student internship experience, success of the program administrator, and program in the HBCU environment. Thus the problem of this study is that African American students, particularly those enrolled at HBCUs encounter difficulties when transitioning to employment in the sports business industry. This problem called for the need to investigate the administrative practices, student concerns, and overall environment of sport and recreation management internship programs within this sector.

This study used a qualitative case study approach because it is best suited to address research problems in which little is known about the variables and more needs to be learned through exploration (Creswell, 2011). The current case study examines the sport and recreation management program at one historically black university by observing the participants within this environment and exploring its value in preparing students for careers.

The conceptual framework that structures this study contains three components: administrative considerations, career development, and the uniqueness of the environment. The data collection process is divided into two phases. During the first phase the researcher conducted a document analysis of course documents, pre-interviews of participants, and a classroom observation during the early portion of the internship course. During the second phase of the study the researcher will conduct post interviews and observe the final presentations of the interns. The coding of data identified repetitive responses and salient issues before identifying major themes related to the internship experience. An inductive data analysis approach was used within this research to ensure validity. This process consisted of openly coding data as concepts, grouping concepts into common categories through axial coding, and finding overarching themes that are significant to this phenomenon.
From the initial data analysis, the researcher found that students are eager to engage in professional experiences outside of the classroom at the start of the internship course. They see the internship experience as a way of not only applying what they have acquired from traditional classes but also as an opportunity to learn new practical lessons from working in various professional settings. The practices used by the internship program director align with the practices that are described in literature about successful internship programs. The directors use of techniques such as hosting ongoing class meetings and one-on-one conferences also promote an aspect of mentorship within the internship program. In addition, student participants perceived that they were ready to transition into the workforce as a result of their internship experience. These findings suggest that internship programs in the field of sport and recreation management may support students’ transitions into the workforce from the HBCU environment.